

Sandra Buechler, PhD

*Psychoanalytic Reflections: Training and Practice*

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In *Psychoanalytic Reflections: Training and Practice* Sandra Buechler expounds on those elements of psychoanalytic training and practice that are so hard to articulate, yet constitute the very essence of psychoanalytic identity. She shares insights garnered over thirty years of learning, teaching, clinical practice, and ever-present personal development that reveal the dialectical nature of psychoanalytic work. She conceptualizes this work not as a science but a culture, one whose ways of being and knowing are simultaneously timeless and contemporary, certain and questionable, clinical but not sterile, permanent yet fragile, and capable of appreciating individual uniqueness while respecting a fundamental humanism. Her writing style seems to be reflective of what one might assume to be her clinical style. It is crisp, clear, sensitive, insightful, and to the point. It is refreshingly free of clinical or theoretical jargon such that at first glance the book and its ideas might seem easy to take in and wrap one's head around. It is not until the reader finds him or herself re-reading a passage two or three times to achieve a beginning sense of its possible meaning that we start to appreciate how Buechler's clear and direct style in no way interferes with her ability to engage with highly complex psychoanalytic matters in a deep and powerful way. For this reason, reading the book is a bit like participating in a psychoanalytic session; highly personal ideas are presented and played with. At first, they might seem readily understandable. When we find ourselves thinking about them and discovering new perspectives about them two or three days later, only then do we garner a full appreciation of their depth, nuance, complexity, and multidimensional role in our lives, and for the process that made these insights possible.

There is a purity to Buechler's writing that seems to be representative of her experience of becoming and being a psychoanalyst. This purity is by no means an ideological or theoretical purity. Indeed, Buechler skillfully demonstrates how theoretical purity is far from what can and should define the career of a psychoanalyst. Rather, the purity here is the purity of openness, fullness, spontaneity, and humanness with which Buechler approaches her goal of being a psychoanalyst. Hers, then, is a profoundly experiential purity that allows us to begin to truly know what the intellectual, clinical, emotional, and interpersonal experience of becoming and being a psychoanalyst is like. The knowing that her writing instills is the type of knowing that only psychoanalysis can offer, that is, a knowing that stems from a uniquely subjective experience that reminds us how perception is integral to any effort to experience and understand reality in its totality. Buechler builds on this conceptualization of psychoanalysis -- psychoanalysis as an interpersonal excavation of the subjective experience of being human -- by dedicating the first section of the book to reflections about psychoanalytic training and the second section of the book to reflections about clinical practice. Her approach does not emphasize clinical techniques or the theories behind them. Rather, her focus is consistently on the emotions that inform the experience of being alive both inside and outside the consulting room.

Section One's first chapter, titled "Joining the Psychoanalytic Culture," is perhaps its most important in that the chapter's ideas resonate throughout the rest of this part of the book. Buechler explains how she sees psychoanalysis as, "a culture and [psychoanalytic] training as a process of acculturation, wherein we learn a language, a set of clinical values, and taboos." Integral to this acculturation process, she says, is a willingness and ability on the part of the candidate to engage with a struggle that will be with him or her in perpetuity, namely, "the

delicate balancing of loyalty to an analytic tradition with the need to develop one's own, unique, personally resonant voice." Later chapters in Section One stress the importance of candidates' willingness to turn inward and engage with their humanness as integral to this process. Specific factors mentioned by Buechler relevant to the psychoanalytic training process include the experience of being shamed during training, working through the tendency to confuse intelligence with wisdom, developing an "internal chorus" of helpful voices and theories to combat loneliness, the beginning development of a candidate's signature clinical style, and confronting the personal and professional pressure to know in cases where the absence of certainty makes objective truth impossible. She sums up training as, "the time to equip ourselves to withstand the rigors of a lifetime of practice. A nurturing internal chorus, a supply of theoretical ideas to play with, and a well-developed sense of clinical purpose can certainly help."

Underscoring these specific reflections is Buechler's conceptualization of psychoanalysis as a culture, or, more precisely, a set of lived ideas the clinical usefulness of which is determined not by theories or techniques but by the practitioner's passionate engagement with his or her humanness. To this end, Buechler speaks about the importance of honoring the knowledge and experiences of candidates' pre-psychoanalytic lives and how institutes might do a better job of incorporating an appreciation for these experiences into the training process. To this point, Buechler demonstrates throughout the book how her pre-psychoanalytic experiences as an emotion theorist remain with her today and play a role in determining how she experiences and lives out her unique psychoanalytic identity.

What might startle candidates and younger analysts reading this book is how Buechler, upon entering psychoanalytic culture, seems to lose any direct contact with non-psychoanalytic culture. As mentioned, her previous non-psychoanalytic culture experiences are acknowledged

and allowed to color her present, but is as if, upon entering psychoanalysis, Buechler's relationship to non-psychoanalytic culture becomes, in terms of lived experiences, a thing of the past limited to memories and associations. This aspect of Buechler's psychoanalytic experience is unlikely to resonate with younger clinicians who must, for financial or other practical purposes, keep one foot in non-psychoanalytic culture while simultaneously attempting to assume an identity and a place in psychoanalytic culture. This is indicative of yet another type of purity to be found in Buechler's reflections, the purity of a psychoanalytic experience seemingly untouched and unscathed by the friction and tension that invariably colors the experience of young clinicians who possess a psychoanalytic identity but who must attempt to carve out an existence in the non-psychoanalytic, even anti-psychoanalytic, culture of many of today's mental health practice settings.

Readers will likely carry these concerns with them into the second part of the book. Yet, by the concluding chapter of this section they are sure to find any fears about possible shortcomings in the value of Buechler's reflections to have been more than adequately allayed. Indeed, despite her seeming to exist exclusively within psychoanalytic culture, Buechler's depiction of her own meaningful, cohesive, and manageable psychoanalytic identity is far from ivory tower. It is timely, relevant, forceful, and, perhaps without intending to, serves as a strong response to those who call into question the value and legitimacy of psychoanalysis today. This is because Buechler's way of conceptualizing and practicing psychoanalysis -- her psychoanalytic life -- represents a radical rejection of the logical positivism and other neo-liberal subjectivities that dominate today's mainstream approach to understanding and treating mental health issues. These subjectivities (individualism, certainty, immediacy, responsibility, the privileging of quantifiable techniques and data), reified through manualized treatments that

enshrine the therapist as expert and the patient as learner, are the antithesis of Buechler's experientialist approach to being psychoanalytic; the former marginalize human subjectivity whereas the latter embraces and privileges "an exchange between two people about what it means to be human... an interaction infused with feeling... a process that proclaims its subjectivity."

Throughout Section Two, Buechler paints a picture of psychoanalytic practice as a survey of the experience of being human. At the core of successful psychoanalytic work, she says, is the analyst's commitment to passionately engaging with his or her humanity, "I don't believe it is, specifically, the analyst's hope that engenders hope in the patient, but the analyst's whole relationship to life." Especially important to this biophilic approach to experience is a willingness to allow oneself access to the full range of human emotion. To this end, in Section Two Buechler dedicates entire chapters to reflections on hope, loneliness, sadness, joy, and guilt. This stance towards life, maintained by the analyst with passionate commitment despite and in the face of life's intractable difficulties and uncertainties, is integral to the change-making power of the therapeutic relationship. It is what guarantees the clinical encounter is one in which the patient is offered an opportunity to figure out how to meaningfully relate to and internalize his or her experience with a life-affirming other. Buechler writes, "For many, this task requires substantive changes, alterations in all components of the emotion system. The deepened curiosity and joy, the lightened envy and hate that results engenders hope."

These reflections on practice, which are clearly of an interpersonal orientation and rely greatly on the humanism of Erich Fromm and H. S. Sullivan, are best summed up in Chapter 10, titled, "My Personal Interpersonalism: An Essay on Sullivan's One-Genus Postulate." In this chapter Buechler writes,

“If I feel your pain, I am both accurate and inaccurate. I may feel something like your pain, and I probably feel something triggered by your pain, but no one can feel pain that is an exact copy of yours. Once the pain enters my system, it is colored by my life experience. My pain is a product of me and you, a mix that is neither purely your pain nor purely my own, but something new. And it is this newness that allows for change to occur.”

The obvious interpersonal aspects of this description aside, its acknowledgement of the value of human subjectivity, its emphasis on an approach to being that favors interdependence over pathological individualism, and its capacity to tolerate, even appreciate, uncertainty speak to core values that transcend any specific psychoanalytic school and are representative of a universal psychoanalytic identity. It is perhaps an expression of how Buechler reifies through her psychoanalytic practice Sullivan’s one genus postulate that “everyone is much more simply human than otherwise.” It is why Buechler expresses the belief that “we spend too much time trying to pin down our differences, and not enough time looking at our commonalities as clinicians.”

But there is something else at play here. Buechler is in a subtle yet powerful way sharing her take on how psychoanalysis facilitates human growth leading to clinical change. To make this point, throughout the book she focuses not on providing factual knowledge but on engaging with the reader in a process like the one that happens between analyst and patient. Namely, the mixing of Buechler’s experiences with the reader’s experiences engenders new perceptions that could not arise were the two subjectivities never to come into contact. In Buechler’s view, this is how psychoanalysis works. The practice of psychoanalysis is the creation of something new, something not entirely accurate, something belonging neither entirely to the therapist nor entirely

to the patient. This something that is created results from the amalgamation of what the analyst and the patient bring to the shared task of attempting to understand the patient's experience of being human. The process of creating and exploring this shared experience leads to a re-calibration of the patient's approach to being alive and understanding life, a re-calibration which co-occurs with diverse types of desired clinical change.

For these reasons, this book is less about conveying factual knowledge than it is an effort to put the reader in contact with a series of personal reflections within which are multiple layers of truth and meaning. Due to their subjective nuance, they are experienced, understood, taken in, and acted upon in diverse ways by each reader. In what amounts to a forceful rejection of the popular but dangerously reductionist notion that clinical work can be reduced to a set of teachable skills acquired through the reading of a manual, Buechler demonstrates how the study of human subjectivity engaged in during psychoanalytic treatment is behind the ability of psychoanalysis to effectuate meaningful, lasting, life-altering clinical change. Buechler's psychoanalytic reflections are in this way both uniquely her own yet invaluable to anyone interested in the profession. Her ability to articulate the living link between an improved understanding of subjective experience and the psychoanalytic process of change and growth means this book will surely be of value to analysts young and old, to candidates in training, and to curious onlookers from outside psychoanalytic culture.

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